

Heritage Information

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Rocklea Munitions Works - S.A.A. Case & Assembly Shop (former)

Key details

Addresses	At 32 Commerce Street, Salisbury, Queensland 4107
Type of place	Defence site
Period	World War II 1939-1945
Lot plan	L1165_CP908946
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 1 January 2005 Date of Information — August 2009

Construction Roof: Corrugated iron;
Walls: Corrugated iron

People/associations Civil Construction Corps (Builder);
Department of the Interior Works and Services Branch (Architect)

Criterion for listing (A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (F) Technical; (G) Social

The former S.A.A. Case and Assembly Shop (Building No. 1) is important as the first building constructed in the Rocklea Munitions Works and the only purpose-built Small Arms Ammunition factory constructed in Queensland during the Second World War. Completed as part of a rearmament program financed by the Commonwealth, this building demonstrates the degree of technical achievement reached nationally in the construction of ammunition factories during the Second World War. When wartime production was at its peak, a minimum of 1,300 people worked in this building.

History

The former Small Arms Ammunition Case and Assembly Shop (Building no. 1) was constructed in 1941, one of approximately eighty buildings that comprised the Rocklea Munitions Works.

The Rocklea Munitions Works

Consisting principally of two Small Arms Ammunition (SAA) plants, known together as SAA Factory No. 5, and a cartridge case factory, the Rocklea Munitions Works (RMW) was established to supply ammunition to the Eastern Supply Group. Although at the time Queensland was strategically vulnerable, construction of a munitions facility in Brisbane was undertaken to decentralise production and take advantage of an available workforce. Between March 1942 and October 1943 a total of 137,729,208 million rounds of small arms ammunition were produced at the RMW, as well as 1,221,122 brass cartridge cases for 25-pounder shells.

The RMW was constructed on land to the north and south of Evans Road, then known as Compo Road. Prior to the Second World War, although suburban development was slowly occurring on the area, the predominant land usage was still primary production. South of Compo Road James Greer and Ernest Barstow had operated slaughter yards on their respective properties backing on to Rocky Water Holes Creek. The establishment of a Queensland Meat Industry Board and the operation of an abattoir at Cannon Hill as a State utility for the City of Brisbane led to the closure in the early 1930s of private slaughter yards such as those in Compo Road. For the next decade the land was used for grazing purposes.

North of Compo Road, Kathleen Quine, Elijah and Alice Beckett and Janet Jensen operated poultry farms during the interwar years. James Greer also owned land on the north of Compo Road. In expectation of residential growth, Greer had subdivided his 16 acre Portion 205 into 67 allotments. By late 1940 none had sold.

As likelihood of war became more apparent, the Minister of Defence announced a rearmament program. This first period of expansion from December 1938 focused on southern states where both raw materials and labour were in close proximity. In June 1940 a second round of munition factory building commenced. A new SAA

factory was constructed at Hendon, South Australia, and a cartridge case factory at Finsbury, also in South Australia.

Early in 1941 the Commonwealth announced that an initial £1,500,000 would be spent in the construction of a Small Arms Ammunition factory at Rocklea, Queensland. The Director-General of Munitions, Essington Lewis, chose the Compo Road site on advice from Department of Munitions officers during a visit on 22 January 1941. The site was considered favourable because it was reasonably flat and above flood level, could be provided readily with road, rail, electricity, water and gas services and was accessible to populated areas.

From February 1941 the Works and Services Branch of the Department of the Interior prepared the plans needed for the RMW. As some of the Small Arms Ammunition section was to be a duplication of factories in southern states, Department of Interior officer Clive Heath made a hurried visit to Melbourne to study already established Small Arms Ammunition factories. Where possible plans were sourced from Victoria or traced off pre-existing plans. The Small Arms Ammunition factory at Rocklea commenced operations in November 1941, ten months after the site was chosen. The cost of completing the buildings, works, services, air raid precautions and camouflage at the Munitions Works amounted to £989,288.

Establishment of the Rocklea Munitions Works involved:

- Extensive surveying and earthworks by the Queensland Main Road Commission.
- Extending the tram service along Compo Road, work conducted by the Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Main Road Commission.
- Upgrading of water supply and electricity services, including the establishment of two new substations by the Brisbane City Council.
- Construction of approximately 80 buildings. Private contractors and the Civil Construction Corps completed this work.
- Production of the tools, gauges, presses and other engineering machinery needed for gun cartridge making. The Queensland Railway Workshops and prominent Queensland engineering firms assisted in this area of expertise.

As preparation of the site progressed, Department of Munitions officers sought financial approval for expenditure of over £1.6 million on stores, raw materials, plant, machinery, equipment and installation work.

JD O'Shea of the Ammunition Factory at Footscray in Victoria was appointed manager of the Rocklea Works on 1 January 1941. Other staff, notably engineers, came from Victorian munitions establishments and private industry. Technical staff were recruited in Queensland. JB Affleck was Chief Accountant. Special training in Melbourne was provided for twelve appointed Queensland accountants. The factory's business administrator was RJ Bright. He was assisted by metallurgist GR Donaldson. The assistant manager was FE Allen, formerly of the Colonial Sugar Refinery. Following interviews in February 1941 fourteen toolmakers, twenty-two trade workers, twenty-eight process workers and fifty-six 'female operators' were chosen for six months training in Melbourne.

The Queensland Main Roads Commission commenced the cutting and filling ground work for the first large building on site, the SAA factory building (now 32 Commerce Street, Salisbury), on 10 March 1941. The first production lot of 200,000 rounds of cartridge SA Ball .303 inch Mk VII was submitted for Army inspection in February 1942. Other types of ammunition produced included cartridge SA Revolver .455 inch MK II, cartridge SA revolver .455 inch Mk VI and cartridge SA revolver .380 inch Mk II. Production units were as follows:

Cartridge SA Ball .303 Inch Mk VII 127,310,520

Cartridge SA Revolver .455 Inch MK II 162,600

Cartridge SA Revolver .455 Inch Mk VI 1,735,200
Cartridge SA Revolver .380 Inch Mk II 8,520,888
Total 137,729,208

In addition the SAA factory reconditioned and repacked American ammunition, some of which had been salvaged from a wreck site. This involved 'rumbling' the ammunition in granulated cork.

The largest building within the Munitions Works was the QF Case Shop, on which foundation work commenced in May 1941. Manufacture of the 25 pounder QF Case Mk II commenced in April 1942. Under the one roof covering 6.25 acres were two cartridge case plants, each plant capable of producing 1 million cases per annum on a one-shift basis.

Although initially planned for the Ipswich Railway Workshops, the manufacture of Shell QF Smoke 25 pounder Mk III was shifted to Rocklea. Production commenced in a small way in July 1943 but was soon wound down. In August 1943 this section of the Works was removed to Rutherford, NSW.

At its peak the Rocklea Munitions Works employed approximately 3,000 people. The larger Footscray factory in Melbourne, by comparison, employed over 9,000. The peak for Rocklea was reached in May 1943 when 926 men and 1,573 women were recorded as engaged in factory work. An additional 500 men and women worked in the associated areas of Army inspection, food services, medical and welfare. Absenteeism was a problem. The reasons blamed for this included the introduction of night shifts, the regimentation of the work, industrial fatigue and lack of proper meals.

From mid-1943, with the threat of invasion removed and less projected demand for munitions, planning commenced for the conversion of the munitions works buildings to the overhaul of aircraft engines. In November 1943 Cabinet approved £385,000 for this task. Munitions equipment was to be removed from buildings by that same month.

Aircraft engine overhaul at the Rocklea works commenced early in 1944. Banks of sound-proofed engine testing stands were constructed at the eastern end of Evans Road. Unfortunately, the demand for aero engine overhaul had by then decreased. A number of the former Munitions Works buildings were then turned over to the military for use as storage facilities.

By the conclusion of the war eighty-two of the buildings within the former Rocklea Munitions Works were occupied by the Department of the Army, the Royal Navy and the Department of Aircraft Production.

Postwar, the former Rocklea facility was viewed as a significant site for future manufacturing and industry. In 1947 the Queensland Government commenced a progressive purchase of the site, commencing with the area north of Evans Road. By 1947 there were fifty-six tenants on the industrial estate occupying 500,000 square feet (46.45 square metres) of floor space with over 700 employees.

Former SAA Case and Assembly Shop (Building No. 1)

The former SAA Case and Assembly Shop was the primary structure within the Rocklea Munitions Works. The building housed the necessary machine tools to form two 'plants', each of which produced and assembled small arms ammunition cartridge cases, then filled and packed them ready for shipment.

Foundation plans for the former SAA Case and Assembly Shop were prepared in February 1941 and forwarded to the Queensland Main Road Commission, which commenced excavating the site on 10 March. Approximately 160,000 cubic yards (122,330 cubic metres) of earth had to be cut and filled to level the area of 138,600 square feet (12,876 square metres) which the building covered. Construction commenced on 23 March 1941. Detail

working drawings continued to be produced by the Works and Services Branch of the Department of Interior throughout March, April and May.

Specialists were brought in from other facilities to oversee the setting up of the SAA Case and Assembly shop. EJ Glayde, who previously had overseen SAA factories in Victoria and South Australia, was appointed engineer in charge of SAA production from January 1941 and remained so until April 1942. Appointed at the same time, engineer JA Layard stayed two years with the Rocklea Works before moving to the Ordnance Factory at Maribyrnong. Operations within Building 1 were overseen by two other staff members. AG Taylor oversaw the case and bullet production; FF Fairlay was in charge of filling and assembly.

The cost of equipping the building with the necessary machinery and equipment was significant. Approvals were gained for expenditure of £300,000. The building became the largest SAA factory in Australia.

Limited production of Small Arms Ammunition commenced in November 1941, even before all the machinery and equipment had been delivered and all the associated buildings completed. The ammunition produced differed in calibre, as can be seen in the table below.

Production commenced	Production concluded	Number of rounds produced		
Cartridge SA Ball .303 Inch Mk VII (All services)	January 1942	August 1943	87,013,224	
Cartridge SA Ball .303 Inch Mk VII (Land services)	March 1942	September 1943	40,297,296	
Cartridge SA Revolver .455 Inch MK II	April 1942	August 1942	162,600	
Cartridge SA Revolver .455 Inch Mk VI	June 1942	June 1943	1,735,200	
Cartridge SA Revolver .380 Inch Mk II	August 1942	September 1943	8,520,888	
Total	137,729,208			

In addition, the SAA Case and Assembly Shop reconditioned and repacked 1,526,000 rounds of .30 inch carbine ammunition and 15,000,000 rounds of .450 inch Thompson submachine gun ammunition for the American Ordnance Depot in Brisbane.

To ensure this large building provided as unrecognisable a target as possible, it was covered with what camoufleurs called 'garnishing'. Through the use of netting and other camouflage devices the building was made to look like a quarry surrounded by scrub.

The number of employees working in the SAA Case and Assembly Shop rose and fell with production. Generally two shifts operated, each overseen by six foremen. Between April and November 1943 employee numbers ranged between 830 and 1043. Women outnumbered men by a ratio of more than two to one. Production increased dramatically from late 1943, as did the number of people employed in Building No. 1. Between January and August 1943 the total number at work in the SAA Case and Assembly Shop was never less than 1,300. From March to July 1943 the number of females employed there each month was always greater than 1,200. Absenteeism was a problem. On one notable day, Friday 26 June 1943, of the 1,728 then employed in the SAA section, 485 were absent from duty.

In a July 1943 conference in Melbourne it was agreed to transfer the whole factory area to the Department of Aircraft Production for the purposes of aircraft engine overhaul. Production of SAA in Building 1 ceased in September. By the end of November all plant was cleared from the building in preparation for a take over by the engine overhaul contractor.

Postwar the building became part of the Salisbury Industrial Estate and was occupied from the late 1940s by Rocklea Spinning Mills.

Statement of significance

Relevant assessment criteria

This is a place of local heritage significance and meets one or more of the local heritage criteria under the Heritage planning scheme policy of the *Brisbane City Plan 2014*. It is significant because:

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history

as the first building constructed within the former Rocklea Munitions Works, built as part of Brisbane's mobilisation for World War II.

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage

as one of the buildings within the only Munitions Works established in Queensland during the Second World War.

Technical

CRITERION F

The place is important in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technological achievement at a particular period

as a large building constructed as part of a rearmament program and according to a design used nationally for the manufacture of munitions.

Social

CRITERION G

The place has a strong or special association with the life or work of a particular community or cultural group for

social, cultural or spiritual reasons

as a building within an industrial site which at its peak employed up to 3,000 workers each day, many of who were women, whose previous participation in the workforce had been neither technical nor considerable.

References

1. A & B Journal of Queensland, February 1941, April 1941, September 1941, October 1941
2. Australian Heritage Database, ADI Footscray, Gordon Street, Footscray, Vic
3. Brisbane City Council Minutes, 1940-44, 1947-48
4. Brisbane City Council Water Supply and Sewerage Detail Plans
5. Coopers Plains Local History Group, *A closer look at Salisbury and Nathan Heights*, Brisbane: CPLHG, 2000
6. *Courier Mail*, 15 March 1941, 31 March 1941, 21 April 1941
7. Department of Natural Resources, Queensland Certificates of Title and other records
8. Environmental Protection Agency
9. JOL Estate Map Collection and photographic collection
10. National Australian Archives (Queensland)
11. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 1; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 1
12. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 1B; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 1B
13. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 2; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 2
14. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J56/11; QL686 Part 3; Rocklea Munitions – acquisition of site Part 3
15. National Australian Archives (Queensland) J2682; W6186 to QS3128; Register of architectural plans and sketch plans, single number
16. National Australian Archives (Victoria), Series MP438/3/0; S/43; History of the Ammunition Factory Rocklea Queensland
17. Queensland Main Roads Commission, *A history of the Queensland Main Roads during World War Two 1939-1945*
18. Trotter, Robin and Colin Mercer, Historical study: Cannon Hill Saleyards. Queensland Department of Housing, Local Government and Planning, Joint Ventures Management Group, 1995
19. Ross, A. T. *Armed and ready: The industrial development and defence of Australia 1900-1945*. Sydney: Turnton & Armstrong, 1995

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Note: This information has been prepared on the basis of evidence available at the time including an external examination of the building. The statement of significance is a summary of the most culturally important aspects of the property based on the available evidence, and may be re-assessed if further information becomes available. The purpose of this information is to provide an informed evaluation for heritage registration and information. This does not negate the necessity for a thorough conservation study by a qualified practitioner, before any action is taken which may affect its heritage significance.

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